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SOME WORDSWORTHIAN SIMILES.

SPEAKING of an earlier stage in the growth of his imagination, the author of "The Prelude" remarks to Coleridge ("Prelude," II, 377-386):

Nor should this, perchance,
Pass unrecorded, that I still had loved
The exercise and produce of a toil,
Than analytic industry to me
More pleasing, and whose character I deem
Is more poetic as resembling more
Creative agency. The song would speak
Of that interminable building reared
By observation of affinities
In objects where no brotherhood exists
To passive minds.

What his amplifying song could not here refrain from uttering struck Wordsworth, 'perchance,' as a matter that might go almost without discussion—at least in a poem addressed to the reflective Coleridge. Yet had Wordsworth been writing a prose treatise for the public, and had he been dealing with the psychology of literary artists in general, instead of the mind of one individual artist, however representative, his pronouncement might have properly taken on a form even more explicit and assured. At all events he would have had good precedent for such assurance. The work on poetics commonly attributed to Aristotle, although it assumes poets to be 'makers of plots'—rather than 'makers of verse'—nevertheless regards the imaginative faculty as lurking, after the final analysis, in an innate command of figurative detail; as residing, therefore, less in the gross structure of a poem than in particular images. According to this view, and to play a little with etymology, we may credit the poet or maker with being a creator of figures or imagery even before he is a creator of fiction or plot:

‘It is a great matter,’ says Aristotle (*Poetics*, XXIII, 9; Butcher’s translation, p. 87), ‘to observe propriety in these several modes of expression—compound words, strange (or rare) words, and so forth. But the greatest thing by far is to have a command of metaphor; it is the mark of genius,—for to make good metaphors implies an eye for resemblances.’

In this paper I wish merely to bring together some of the marks of Wordsworth’s genius, choosing from the wealth of his imagery a number of those figures in which, as it seems to me, his originality, and boldness of vision, and, if they are contemplated steadily, his justice of vision also, are most strikingly exemplified. Undoubtedly, his eye for resemblances may be appreciated best through his similes and direct comparisons; in these the affinities that he discovers between ‘objects where no brotherhood exists to passive minds’ are most plainly affirmed; more plainly, of course, than in his *metaphors*, if the latter term be restricted to its technical usage. Inasmuch as the similes here collected represent to me ultimate elements in Wordsworth’s style, I have made no systematic effort to find external ‘sources’ for them,—although here and there they may remind one of Virgil or Shakespeare or the Bible. Nor have I tried to arrange them according to any plan suggestive of analytic industry. Obviously, they might be grouped under a few main heads, for example: similes or comparisons implying a ‘brotherhood’ existent between man and the lower animals, or between man and inanimate nature, so-called, or between inanimate nature and the lower animals; yet even this arrangement might savor of a partition in the great whole of nature such as Wordsworth would hardly countenance. It is, in fact, his active sense of a vital unity pervading the great whole that enables him to assert so strong, often so startling, a bond of affinity among the parts. Accordingly, I shall content myself with presenting this material as I have noted it, supplying now and then a word of explanation where the sense demands it, but trusting that the separate comparisons by themselves will be enough ‘to startle and way-lay’ the reader, and afterwards ‘to haunt’ him, without further literary artifice.

The first 'creative' synthesis to summon our attention belongs to the early period described by Wordsworth in the lines at the beginning. It is extremely characteristic :

Calm is all nature as a resting wheel.

("Written In Very Early Youth," l. 1.)¹

In their present connection the following need no comment.

Free as a colt at pasture on the hill,
I ranged at large, through London's wide domain,
Month after month.

("Prelude," Book ix, ll. 23-25.)²

She shall be sportive as the fawn
That wild with glee across the lawn
Or up the mountain springs.

("Three years she grew in sun and shower," ll. 13-15.)³

Here is the seductive and alluring half-breed pictured in "Ruth" :

He was a lovely Youth ! I guess
The panther in the wilderness
Was not so fair as he ;
And, when he chose to sport and play,
No dolphin ever was so gay
Upon the tropic sea.

("Ruth," ll. 37-42.)⁴

Wordsworth's cloud-similes are familiar :

Soft as a cloud is yon blue Ridge—⁵

I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host, of golden daffodils.

("I wandered lonely as a cloud," ll. 1-4.)⁶

¹ Wordsworth, *Poetical Works*, Aldine Edition, Vol. I, p. 4. Other references to Wordsworth's poems in this article are to the Aldine Edition, simply by volume and page, thus : *P. W.*, i. 4.

² *P. W.*, vii. 170.

³ *P. W.*, ii. 96.

⁴ *P. W.*, ii. 112.

⁵ *P. W.*, iv. 143.

⁶ *P. W.*, ii. 96.

He told of the magnolia, spread
High as a cloud, high over head !
The cypress and her spire.

(“Ruth,” ll. 61-63.)¹

With these compare :

The Knight had ridden down from Wensley Moor
With the slow motion of a summer's cloud.

(“Hart-Leap Well,” ll. 1-2.)²

In the next two, it is probable, we have reminiscences of Wordsworth's reading in the Arctic explorers. He is seeking for violent figures with which to depict phases of the French Revolution.

. . . zeal, which yet
Had slumbered, now in opposition burst
Forth like a Polar summer.

(“Prelude,” Book ix, ll. 254-256.)³

Look ! and behold, from Calpe's sunburnt cliffs
To the flat margin of the Baltic sea,
Long-reverenced titles cast away as weeds ;
Laws overturned ; and territory split,
Like fields of ice rent by the polar wind.

(“Excursion,” Book ix, ll. 336-340.)⁴

In the following, however, he seems to be drawing on his own observation—let us say, of Rydal or Grasmere :

Calm as a frozen lake when ruthless winds
Blow fiercely, agitating earth and sky,
The Mother now remained.

(“Excursion,” Book iii, ll. 650-652.)⁵

Our poet's objective and passionless contemplation of death is typical in “Matthew” :

Poor Matthew, all his frolics o'er,
Is silent as a standing pool.

(“Matthew,” ll. 17-18.)⁶

Wordsworth's line on Milton is classical :

¹P. W., II. 112.

²P. W., II. 133.

³P. W., VII. 176.

⁴P. W., VI. 297.

⁵P. W., VI. 95.

⁶P. W., IV. 211.

Thy soul was like a Star, and dwelt apart.

(*"London, 1802,"* l. 9.)¹

His image of our western Indian is probably less familiar :

Free as the sun, and lonely as the sun.

(*"Excursion,"* Book III, l. 941.)²

His description of his wife, again, will be generally recognized :

Her eyes as stars of Twilight fair ;

Like Twilight's, too, her dusky hair.

(*"She was a Phantom of delight,"* ll. 5-6.)³

Likewise his daffodils :

Continuous as the stars that shine

And twinkle on the milky way,

They stretched in never-ending line

Along the margin of a bay.

(*"I wandered lonely as a cloud,"* ll. 7-10.)⁴

Curious is his recollection of the room in Paris where he slept at the outbreak of the Revolution :

The place, all hushed and silent as it was,

Appeared unfit for the repose of night,

Defenceless as a wood where tigers roam.

(*"Prelude,"* Book X, ll. 91-93.)⁵

Curious also his remembrance of that noble revolutionist, his friend Beaupuy :

. . . while he read,

Or mused, his sword was haunted by his touch

Continually, like an uneasy place

In his own body.

(*"Prelude,"* Book IX, ll. 158-161.)⁶

I have already noticed several Wordsworthian similes of calm. None is more famous than this :

¹*P. W.*, III. 134.

²*P. W.*, VI. 104.

³*P. W.*, II. 94.

⁴*P. W.*, II. 98.

⁵*P. W.*, VII. 190.

⁶*P. W.*, VII. 174.

It is a beauteous evening, calm and free,
The holy time is quiet as a Nun
Breathless with adoration.

(“It is a beauteous evening . . . ,” ll. 1-3.)¹

Similes of agitation are likewise typical :

Surprised by joy—impatient as the Wind,
I turned to share the transport—Oh! with whom
But Thee, deep buried in the silent tomb.

(“Surprised by joy . . . ,” ll. 1-3.)²

. . . but the man,
Who trembled, trunk and limbs, like some huge oak
By a fierce tempest shaken, soon resumed
The steadfast quiet natural to a mind
Of composition gentle and sedate.

(“Excursion,” Book VI., ll. 143-147.)³

As a matter of fact, the rapid transition from tumult to repose is one of Wordsworth’s favorite devices. So here :

. . . that Soul,
Which with the motion of a virtuous act
Flashes a look of terror upon guilt,
Is, after conflict, quiet as the ocean,
By a miraculous finger stilled at once.

(“Borderers,” Act I., ll. 169-173.)⁴

And here :

This Sea that bares her bosom to the moon ;
The winds that will be howling at all hours,
And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers ;
For this, for everything, we are out of tune.

(“The world is too much with us . . . ,” ll. 5-8.)⁵

Occasionally in Wordsworth there is the touch of Homer :

. . . far into the night
The Housewife plied her own peculiar work,
Making the cottage through the silent hours
Murmur as with the sound of summer flies.

(“Michael,” ll. 125-128.)⁶

¹*P. W.*, III. 20.

²*P. W.*, III. 18.

³*P. W.*, VI. 191.

⁴*P. W.*, I. 83 ; cf. Mark 4 : 39.

⁵*P. W.*, III. 21.

⁶*P. W.*, I. 308.

I add a number more without remark :

Light as a sunbeam glides along the hills
She vanished—eager to impart the scheme
To her loved brother and his shy compeer.
(“Excursion,” Book ix, ll. 429-431.)¹

. . . and the boat advanced
Through crystal water, smoothly as a hawk,
That, disentangled from the shady boughs
Of some thick wood, her place of covert, cleaves
With correspondent wings the abyss of air. .
(“Excursion,” Book ix, ll. 490-494.)²

No fountain from its rocky cave
E'er tripped with foot so free ;
She seemed as happy as a wave
That dances on the sea.
(“The Two April Mornings,” ll. 49-52.)³

And while the Pony moves his legs,
In Johnny's left hand you may see
The green bough motionless and dead :
The Moon that shines above his head
Is not more motionless than he.
(“The Idiot Boy,” ll. 77-81.)⁴

Perhaps he's turned himself about,
His face unto his horse's tail,
And still and mute, in wonder lost,
All silent as a horseman-ghost,
He travels slowly down the vale.
(“The Idiot Boy,” ll. 322-326.)⁵

In one way or another, Wordsworth knew a great deal about
the joys of travel and discovery :

Before me shone a glorious world—
Fresh as a banner bright, unfurled
To music suddenly.
(“Ruth,” ll. 169-171.)⁶

Two lines from “The Thorn,”

¹*P. W.*, vi. 300.

²*P. W.*, vi. 302.

³*P. W.*, iv. 213.

⁴*P. W.*, i. 292.

⁵*P. W.*, i. 300.

⁶*P. W.*, ii. 116.

Not higher than a two years' child
It stands erect, this aged Thorn

(*"The Thorn,"* ll. 5-6)¹

remind us of various similar passages, among them the Wordsworthian couplet near the beginning of Coleridge's *"Ancient Mariner"* :

And listens like a three years' child :
The Mariner hath his will.

Wordsworth rated very highly the imaginative quality in *"Peter Bell."* Was this partly on account of the similes in that poem? Three or four instances from it may not be out of place.

The Ass is startled—and stops short
Right in the middle of the thicket ;
And Peter, wont to whistle loud
Whether alone or in a crowd,
Is silent as a silent cricket.

(*"Peter Bell,"* ll. 621-625.)²

By this his heart is lighter far ;
And, finding that he can account
So snugly for that crimson stain,
His evil spirit up again
Does like an empty bucket mount.

(*"Peter Bell,"* ll. 801-805.)³

But as an oak in breathless air
Will stand though to the centre hewn ;
Or as the weakest things, if frost
Have stiffened them, maintain their post ;
So he beneath the gazing moon !—

(*"Peter Bell,"* ll. 846-850.)⁴

But, more than all, his heart is stung
To think of one, almost a child ;
A sweet and playful Highland girl,
As light and beauteous as a squirrel,
As beauteous and as wild !

(*"Peter Bell,"* ll. 886-890.)⁵

¹*P. W.*, II. 125.

²*P. W.*, II. 241.

³*P. W.*, II. 247 ; cf. Shakespeare, *Richard II.*, IV. 1. 185.

⁴*P. W.*, II. 248.

⁵*P. W.*, II. 250.

My list would surely be incomplete without an example from the poem in which, as one of the best of Wordsworthian critics, R. H. Hutton, averred, our poet reached the high-water mark of his power and technique, the "Song at the Feast of Brougham Castle":

Now Who is he that bounds with joy
On Carrock's side, a Shepherd-boy?
No thoughts hath he but thoughts that pass
Light as the wind along the grass.
Can this be He who hither came
In secret, like a smothered flame?
(*"Song at the Feast of Brougham Castle,"* ll. 72-77.)¹

Nor should the passage be omitted that Wordsworth introduces, from his own works, in his "Preface to the Edition of 1815," as an illustration of the way in which the poetic faculty is employed 'upon images in a conjunction by which they modify each other':

As a huge stone is sometimes seen to lie
Couched on the bald top of an eminence;
Wonder to all who do the same espy,
By what means it could thither come, and whence;
So that it seems a thing endued with sense:
Like a sea-beast crawled forth, that on a shelf
Of rock or sand reposeeth, there to sun itself;
Such seemed this Man, not all alive nor dead,
Nor all asleep—in his extreme old age.
(*"Resolution and Independence,"* ll. 57-65.)²

'In these images,' Wordsworth explains,³ 'the conferring, the abstracting, and the modifying powers of the Imagination, immediately and mediately acting, are all brought into conjunction. The stone is endowed with something of the power of life to approximate it to the sea-beast, and the sea-beast stripped of some of its vital qualities to assimilate it to the stone; which intermediate image is thus treated for the purpose of bringing the original image, that of the stone, to a nearer resemblance to the figure and condition of the aged Man; who is divested of

¹*P. W.*, II. 142.

²*P. W.*, II. 121-122.

³*Wordsworth's Literary Criticism*, ed. Nowell C. Smith, 1905, p. 160.

so much of the indications of life and motion as to bring him to the point where the two objects unite and coalesce in just comparison.'

As may be surmised from examples given above, Wordsworth, through the boldness and rapidity of his vision, often omits such steps of assimilation or 'coalescence' as he here unfolds; yet his most surprising comparisons are not on that account necessarily less 'just.' Similes must sometimes have flashed upon his inward eye with such a compelling claim to reality that, however remote the two objects compared might be 'to passive minds,' he was constrained to disregard all the steps of ordinary artistic gradation in uniting them. In such cases, to 'modify' might have involved a false and unworthy manipulation. Wordsworth's similes, no matter how abrupt at first sight, are a part of his truest experience. 'Many of my poems,' so he tells us¹, 'have been influenced by my own circumstances, when I was writing them. "The Warning" was composed on horseback, while I was riding from Moreby in a snow-storm. Hence the simile in that poem,

While thoughts press on and feelings overflow
And quick words round him fall like *flakes of snow*.'

It is not, then, on account of a superficial interest or peculiarity attaching to Wordsworth's similes that I have brought some of them together for inspection, but rather on account of their deep underlying truth—truth to their author and to the constitution of things as he saw it. At first blush a few of them may appear to be literary abortions, crude excrescences. But if it be generally admitted that Wordsworth saw more profoundly into nature than any other English poet of his era, we may be unsafe in rejecting even the least expected of his comparisons—for example,

Calm is all nature as a resting wheel

—without a considerable pause for reflection. To the passive

¹ *Memoirs of Wordsworth*, by Christopher Wordsworth, II. 486.

mind they may now and then be a stumbling-block, and to the unsympathetic, foolishness. Their truth and justice become apparent when they are dwelt upon with active sympathy by a mind that through habit is less inclined to condemn than to admire.

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